

Grammar Intensive for Writers (1 of 2)

Webinar Notes

November 21, 2019

Two Rules for Better Prose

- For every sentence you write, be aware of where the action is (who did what), and make it your HABIT to express the action as a verb and the actor as the grammatical subject of the verb.
- Keep subjects close to verbs.

Two Corollaries to the Two Rules for Better Prose

- You need to get good at identifying grammatical subjects and verbs.
- You need to be aware of the distinction between actors and actions on the one hand and grammatical subjects and verbs on the other.

Some sentences in which grammar does NOT align with the action depicted

Sentence 1: From a piece about turf wars in the back seat on family vacation:

Any aimless wandering past the center line of the back seat was grounds for an elbow to the chest or a kick to the leg.

The subject-verb nexus of this sentence is “wandering was.” There is a lot of action in this sentence. Kids are wandering past the center line. They’re elbowing one another. They’re kicking one another. But none of that action is expressed as a verb in this sentence. None of the kids make it into the sentence either.

It’s hard to know how to fix this sentence, since we don’t know who is doing what. But here’s one option:

Any time I wandered aimlessly past the center line of the back seat, my sister gave me an elbow to the chest. And every time my sister elbowed me in the chest, I kicked her.

Note that when you do commit to aligning subjects and verbs with actors and actions, you’re on the hook to be clearer and more concrete.

Sentence 2:

I was six and this was the beginning of questioning the existence of Santa Claus.

What are the actions here? Besides “being” six, a guy is beginning to question something, and we have Santa Claus existing (or not existing, as the case may be). But the beginning, the questioning, and the existing all get expressed as nominalized verbs. The only verbs in the sentence are two instances of *was*. The first is fine. There’s not a better way to convey that a six-year-old’s age than to say he “was” six. But that second *was* makes those static nominalizations possible.

A couple of possible rewrites:

I was six and beginning to question the existence of Santa Claus.

I was six and beginning to wonder whether Santa Claus was real.

A sentence in which the grammar and the action DO align

If you’ve seen *Chariots of Fire*, you’ll know this sentences (and if you haven’t seen *Chariots of Fire*, go watch it). Eric Liddell said:

When I run, I feel God’s pleasure.

This sentence consists of two clauses: an adverbial clause (When I run), and a main clause (I feel God’s pleasure). There are two actions (one per clause) and in each clause the action is expressed as a verb, and the actor is the subject of the verb.

This isn’t rocket science, obviously, but one reason I like this example is that it illustrates an important concept: When you are trying to convey an abstract or interior idea (like feeling God’s pleasure), it’s all the more important that you take the concrete, the straightforward, the who-did-what, where you can get it.

It’s not hard to imagine a sentence along these lines:

Running makes me feel God’s pleasure.

That’s not terrible, but notice that the subject becomes the gerund *running* and Eric Liddell finds himself in a more passive position. (This isn’t a passive construction in the technical sense, but Eric Liddle is now an object in the main clause rather than the subject of the main clause.)

Passive Voice

Two of the biggest ways writers break the actor-action/subject-verb rule are **passive voice** and **nominalization**. We will take them one at a time.

The passive voice breaks the rule by moving the actor out of the subject position. Forget about the technicalities of how to form the passive voice (e.g., changing the verb to the fourth principal part and sticking a *to be* verb in front of it). You've been able to handle those technicalities since you were little. Here's all you need to know about the passive voice: **The passive voice moves the recipient of an action into the subject position.** The actor, then, gets relegated to a prepositional phrase (or worse).

Here's an ACTIVE construction:

(sub) (vb) (IO) (DO)
Ken gave Barbie flowers.

The grammar aligns with the action. Ken is performing the action, so he's the subject. Barbie and the flowers are on the receiving end of Barbie's action, so they are objects in this active-voice sentence.

To turn that sentence PASSIVE, you can move either the indirect object *Barbie* or the direct object *flowers* to the subject position. If this were an ESL class, I might tell you to turn *gave* into the fourth principal part *given* and insert *were*, but I don't have to do that, because you already know how to do that, even if you don't know what a fourth principal part is.

Here are some PASSIVE versions of the same sentence:

Barbie was given flowers by Ken.
Flowers were given to Barbie by Ken.
Flowers were given to Barbie.

Poor Ken.

Notice that the *action* is the same in all of these sentences. Only the grammar is different. When you read any of these passive sentences, you the reader have to transpose that grammar back into the who-did-what of the active voice (though, in that third passive sentence, it would be hard to know how to transpose it, since the actor has disappeared).

Nominalization

Nominalization is the second big way writers break the actor-action/subject-verb rule. Nominalization is simply the practice of converting a verb into a noun (or maybe an adjective) so that the action doesn't get expressed in the verb position, but elsewhere in the sentence.

Here is a nice, non-nominalized sentence:

When Bronson discovered that Cindy had defied the school bully, he congratulated her.

There are three actions in that sentence: Bronson discovers something, Cindy defies somebody, and Bronson congratulates Cindy. Each of those actions is expressed as a verb with the actor as its subject.

But each of those verbs can also be an abstract noun:

discovered → discovery
defied → defiance
congratulated → congratulations

A nominalized version of that sentence would replace some or all of those verbs with the abstract nouns:

Bronson's discovery of Cindy's defiance of the school bully resulted in congratulations.

Now instead of human actors, our one grammatical subject is the abstract noun *discovery*, and our verb is the rather anemic *resulted in*. Also notice how many prepositional phrases elbow their way in when you start nominalizing.

Let's put these two sentences side by side:

Non-nominalized version

When Bronson discovered that Cindy had defied the school bully, he congratulated her.

Nominalized version

Bronson's discovery of Cindy's defiance of the school bully resulted in congratulations.

If someone were to ask you what's so bad about the sentence on the right, you might say it was too wordy. It certainly *feels* wordy. But the nominalized sentence actually has *fewer* words than the regular version! "Wordiness" isn't a matter of word-count so much as a matter of feeling as if you are wandering around lost in a forest of words.

Keep Subjects Close to Verbs

When a sentence isn't working right, here's a great place to start fixing it: see if you can get the subject and verb closer together. I was reading through Kathleen Norris's great book, *Acedia and Me*, and I ran into this booger of a sentence (which was especially glaring because all of her other sentences are so good):

The desert father who expounds on the inherent value of meditating on Scripture by observing, "Even if we do not understand the meaning of the words we are saying, when the demons hear them, they take fright and go away," insults our intelligence."

The subject of that sentence is *father*. The verb is *insults*. There are forty-seven words between them! The task of revising this sentence may seem daunting, but if you start by getting the subject closer to the verb (and remember that you don't have to do all this in one sentence), the sentence starts to fix itself.

Here's one way:

One of the desert fathers observed, "Even if we do not understand the meaning of the words we are saying, when the demons hear them, they take fright and go away." His point was that there is inherent value in meditating on Scripture. But he insults our intelligence.

I'm not entirely sure that the author would be satisfied with my revision. That last sentence comes down with a bit of a bump. And yet, sorting out the grammar this way makes it much easier for the author to make the adjustments that *would* satisfy her (and the reader).

Here are a couple of other examples from student exercises:

The processes involved in shaping the channel in places where the turns swung wide, as the water flowed across the floodplain, mesmerized me.

Suggested revision:

I was mesmerized by the processes involved in shaping the channel in places where the turns swung wide, as the water flowed across the floodplain.

In that revision, notice that I moved the subject closer to the verb by turning the whole thing into a passive construction. (As a matter of fact, I suspect that the whole reason the student wrote the sentence the way he did was to avoid using the passive voice.) As suspicious as I am of the passive voice, in this case it accomplishes two important things: it moves the subject nineteen words closer to the verb, and it changes the grammatical subject from the abstract noun *processes* to the very human *I*.

Here's one more:

The feeling, familiar in those years, that I was of a different species from the people around me surged up again.

Sixteen words between the subject *feeling* and the verb *surged*. Get those words next to one another, and good things start to happen:

A familiar feeling surged up in me again—a feeling that I was of a different species from the people around me.

I want you to notice something important about the three convoluted sentences in this section: the simplified, clarified versions aren't shorter! In each case, the repaired version is actually a word or two longer. Nor do we resort to simplistic sentence structure in the repaired versions. Actually, the three sentences in my revision of the Kathleen Norris example are considerably simpler than Norris's original sentence, but in the other two examples, the sentence structure is still complex. If your reader can easily get from subject to verb to object, he can handle all kinds of complexity.

A Final Word from Joseph M. Williams

I should mention that much of what I've had to say in this webinar originated with Joseph M. Williams's book, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*. His chapter on Clarity really transformed the way I think about writing and the teaching of writing. So check that book out.

I'll close with this very helpful quotation from that chapter—another, more eloquent way of saying what I said above:

I should clarify an often misunderstood point: clear writing does not require Dick-and-Jane sentences. Almost all of the revisions [in the chapter] are shorter than the originals, but the objective is not curtness: what counts is not the number of words in a sentence, but how easily we get from beginning to end while understanding everything in between.

Yes and amen.